

ART. II.—*Moral Responsibility.* By MR. H. K. RUSDEN.

[Read 24th February, 1868.]

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY,

I think it will not, and cannot, be contested that the current morality is lamentably imperfect; and that an alarming proportion of society being immoral, it follows that sufficient reasons for being moral are either unknown or do not exist. The fact that some persons are moral affords ground, however, for believing that such reasons are to be found; and if it be possible to discover and disseminate them, so as to augment the number of the moral and diminish that of the immoral, I think that time could not be better spent than in endeavouring to render such a service to humanity. Trusting that this is possible, let us, as an essential preliminary, examine the subject of moral responsibility.

In dealing with moral subjects, great obscurity arises from the arbitrary addition to those qualities of human actions which constitute them physically good or bad, of a totally different and transcendental class of qualities, in conformity with the hypothesis of merit and demerit. The reality of the distinction upon which that hypothesis is based, has been repeatedly and gravely questioned; and therefore it should not be too rashly assumed. A presumption against it is at least suggested by its mysterious nature. But, avoiding the adoption of any premisses which might be disputed, we may safely postulate that the distinction between pleasure and pain, or physical good and physical evil, is more clear, certain, and indisputable, than that which imputes merit or demerit to an intelligent agent. The former is discerned readily and clearly by children and savages, long before they acquire the slightest glimmering of the latter. Many, indeed, never arrive at the conception of merit and demerit; which proves that it is certainly not original and universal, like that of pleasure and pain. Without assuming, as might be contended, that this alone is fatal to the more subtle theory, and desiring to take for granted no more than would be conceded by those who uphold it most strenuously, I propose first to examine the most currently propounded bases for it;

and, if still necessary, to search then for some more definite and consistent principle as a guide to a feasible and universal morality. We surely cannot adopt a course better calculated to attain this end ; and, if we fail to do so, then, I say, that though we may not have proved the popular theories to be merely factitious, still the probability of their reality will be so far lessened ; and, if we arrive at any more substantial and effective principle, then the importance and essential value of the system of merit and demerit,—praise and blame,—will have been sufficiently disproved.

To begin with our terms. The term moral is derived from the Latin (*mos, moris, moralis*), for manners, customs ; and it is often used in a similar sense among us. It remains to be seen whether every practical purpose would not be better served by using it thus only. Moral philosophy is defined as the study of social duties. Moral responsibility implies, beside *moral obligation*,—which I would interpret as the reason why a man acts well rather than ill, because an *obligation*, to be real, should *oblige*,—that he is answerable to some *authority* for doing one or the other. But it seems to me that the day is past when any authority could be quoted as a universal guide for conduct. The idea is wholly repugnant to the tendencies of modern thought, which entirely claims, if it cannot secure, for man, exemption from control by any power in the constitution of which he has no voice. Even under the most despotic monarchies of Europe, the principle of no taxation, and even no legislation, without representation, is asserted by all who dare to speak their minds.

But to whom or to what, and in what manner can man be responsible or answerable for his acts ? Some will say to God. But the existence of immorality proves that God does not interpose to prevent it, which is the very thing that we require ; and all who recognise and appreciate the absolutely sequential operation of natural forces upon man, as inevitably as upon any other object in the universe, and the proof of this afforded by statistics ; must see, that, as physical and social influences are all that are certainly discernible as affecting or necessary to account for the conduct of man, and are fully adequate causes of all such effects, the gratuitous introduction of doubtful occult forces can be productive only of complication and difficulty. In any case, upon thousands who admit a divine authority it is notoriously practically inoperative ; and it is necessarily so upon all who know

nothing of, or disown it. It has thus to give way to the agent whom it should govern, and the man proves superior to his authority. And as thus no authority, even though divine, is adequately operative upon those for whose control it is most required, the principle, as affecting morality, must be dismissed as inefficacious and invalid; for what we want, and what is indispensable, is a principle of universal, not of partial application or force.

But the moral efficacy upon conduct of the theory of a future state of rewards and punishments forms another essential part of the *religious sanction*, as it has been called; and has been so commonly deemed indispensable as a basis of moral government, that it demands careful consideration, notwithstanding that it involves that of the authority of a Deity—which, as regards the prevention of immorality, we have already been obliged to relinquish. Let us therefore here, for the sake of argument, admit the authority of a Deity as the only one competent to effect a *post mortem* rectification of mundane conditions, and examine whether this doctrine, which includes the whole relevant part of the religious sanction, combines the indispensable conditions of consistency with itself and universal efficacy upon men.

When we consider that any theory which demands a state of future existence, as necessary to provide an opportunity of satisfying or completing justice in the administration of this life, actually and essentially involves the rash, not to say impious assumption of injustice in the Divine government *here*; and also, in addition, of a radical change to an entirely opposite treatment *hereafter*; we cannot but acknowledge that a theory of morality which should require such a basis, would be subversive not only of itself, but also of a belief in two of the most important attributes of the Deity—justice and unchangeableness.

To hold that *God does or permits evil that good may come*, seems to me the very essence of blasphemy; for to assert that he *cannot* effect all good without any evil, amounts to a denial of his omniscience or omnipotence; and to say that he *will not*, is even worse; being a positive imputation of malevolence. And if in man such conduct can only be excused by stupid ignorance, its culpability should augment in proportion to knowledge. Inconsistency thus seems inherent in the theory.

Still, to secure a universal basis for moral principles is an object of so much importance, that *certain efficacy* might

atone even for such inconsistency as I have just exposed, and would lead me to suspect an error in the argument; which, however, would be proportionately strengthened should the contrary appear. I will therefore consider the *effects* of the theory of a future life upon present morality.

It seems proper to remember that all the evidence for the probability of this theory, is purely traditional, and derived from a comparatively barbarous ignorant age; and we know that opinions, even among its advocates, have always been divided as to its possible reality and conditions.

It seems clear that any theory at variance with experience, and of which all verification and tangible proof is so indefinitely postponed, can at best have no more than a doubtful influence even upon the speculative and curious, and cannot be supposed to govern the impulsive busy mass. The motives to conduct afforded by any such considerations must necessarily be weak in exact proportion to their distance and uncertainty, as compared with present, pressing, felt wants. We all know that force acts inversely as the square of the distance. So the distance or frequency of the sittings of courts of justice, determines in miles or in hours the amount of their moral effect. Altogether the whole subject of *post mortem* conditions is necessarily so obscure, that as regards motives to conduct, it can furnish none to compete in vividness and strength with present, potent temptations, and immediate urgent necessities, which obliterate all distant and merely supposititious considerations. Whenever the two classes of motives compete, those which are least distant and most certain, are inevitably victorious. If we find that facts corroborate this opinion, the inefficacy upon conduct of the theory of a future life will be substantially established, and my argument of the inconsistency of the doctrine practically confirmed.

It is surely incontestable that there is a proportion, and probably everywhere about the same, of men of every religion and in every country, who are really good, and another of those who are bad; the one class comprising those whose conduct forms the criterion of the local moral code; and the other, those who fall below and violate it. The precise relative proportions of the two classes are immaterial to my argument, but their existence is indubitable. A part, and a part only, of those who are good, inevitably profess the local religion whatever it be; for those well inclined, unless unusually critical, eagerly adopt the reasons cur-

rently taught for acting well, and naturally accept them as valid and true. But though the conduct of a few may give some plausibility to the notion that their theoretical principles cause their pure practice, the indisputable facts—that religions are as antagonistic as they are various; that men are good or bad, though of any or no religion; that large numbers are, equally with the best, exposed to religious influences without becoming moral; and that the most pious men have been betrayed into vindictive and cruel intolerance by their religious principles and feelings,—prove that virtue is caused not by religion, but rather by individual intelligence and temperament, developed by cultivation and modified by those natural conditions of climate, diet, and scenery, or what Mr. Buckle calls “aspects of nature,” which determine the general characteristics of nations and their local moral customs. These, again, are of course affected by changes in their social relations and their advances towards civilization. And it seems to me a grievous libel upon those whom we instinctively revere and love for their inherent virtues (as well as an outrage upon common sense) to say that they are by nature and inclination abominably sinful; and that their good qualities are not really theirs, but are wholly attributable either to a theoretical system current where they happened to be born, or to the overruling influence of a capricious Deity, impiously asserted to soften or harden whom he will.

Moral rules have sometimes been advantageously formulated by teachers of religion, who were compelled to adopt and incorporate them with their dogmas, to which they could otherwise never have hoped to secure a listener. For no theory of immorality would be tolerated among men. Every religionist devoutly fancies that it is his religion which makes him good, and is surprised that others can be good on any other principles; indeed, he is often inclined to deny the fact, and to regard their virtue as mainly spurious; whereas, in truth, his own virtue is owing to his superior organisation and to the natural morality with which he has associated his religion, and which alone renders it acceptable. As a proof of this we find that whenever the religion has been pushed into predominance, morality has been to the same extent sacrificed; real moral ties have been subordinated to supposed supernatural duty, and violated to such an extent as to produce among rude nations, even the immolation, not only of enemies by their conquerors, but of children by their

parents ; and in partially civilised times and countries, the results have been those fearful reciprocal persecutions and wholesale massacres which constituted far more pernicious evils than any pestilence or famine ; inasmuch as in addition to the cruel destruction of innocent thousands by deaths often devised as the most painful, the bitterest hatred and rancour were excited and aggravated to an extreme to which no other known cause has ever proved adequate. Such effects can only be considered as distinctly antagonistic to all genuine morality. The radical difference and even opposition thus shown to exist between the religious and moral sanctions, teaches us that their aims and functions should be entirely dissociated ; that their connection is illegitimate, and their offspring therefore an abortion or a monstrosity.

It may still be said, however, that man is responsible to society ; and this might hold while his acts affect society, and he not only acknowledges but bows to its authority. But society takes no cognizance of many of his acts, and very imperfectly prevents what it knows and disapproves. And who can deny his right to throw off its authority when he has the power ? It is because he actually *does* this whenever he lists, failing to perceive that his highest interests are best served by yielding to the restrictions which society imposes on each for the benefit of all, that we are driven to seek a more universal and effective basis for morality. The fact that any mere authority *can* be contravened with impunity, is fatal to the efficacy and validity of the principle in any shape or form.

To what then can man be responsible ? and in what consists his obligation to virtuous conduct ? Let us analyse his position and the facts. When man is tempted to commit a social offence, or any act whatever, and regards solely his object or himself, he experiences no check but what is imposed by direct physical obstacles ; which however are often wanting, and the act is forthwith completed. If, however, he abstain, it is in every case either from mere habit, which avails nothing in unusual circumstances, or from *a consideration of the probable direct or indirect consequences of the act.** This I think must be evident.

* "First I conceive that when it cometh into a man's mind to do or not to do some certain action, if he have no time to *deliberate*, the doing it or abstaining *necessarily* follows the *present* thought of the *good* or *evil* consequence to himself."—Hobbes's Works, vol. iv., p. 272.

Animals act without reasoning—man can reason, and thus is in a position to become a moral being; but he cannot be perfectly moral unless he not only reasons, but reasons accurately, and also acts accordingly. If the consequences would apparently be evil to himself, so much more evil than the immediate or prospective good as to compensate for any difference of distance—if the general balance of probable results be evil, or *appear evil to him*—he will, nay, he must, forego the lesser for the sake of the greater good, and avoid the preponderant evil.

If it be said that some men act for the good of others to their own manifest injury, I reply that they do so solely because it pleases them best. Their own pleasure is far greater in contemplating the distribution of good among others, than in the limited inferior pleasure of sense. They *feel* that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The indirect or moral intellectual pleasure is superior *for them* in degree and in kind, in extent and in duration, to any direct and merely sensuous one; but both are physical results of reflex nervous action, and unless a mind is nearly as narrow as a beast's, it cannot be satisfied with mere direct temporary enjoyment. An organism with a brain bearing a large proportion to the rest of its nervous system, cannot be satisfied with gratifications which arise or locate in the subordinate parts of that system. Where the convolutions of the brain are large and numerous, they imperatively demand, and in a healthy system, reproduce the activity which first developed them; and it is only in nervous systems, whose function is fitted for little more than to support life, that what may be called organic pleasures can adequately satisfy their demands.

Doubtless much, and very much, depends upon the accuracy of man's apprehension of the probable good and evil consequences of his acts. If this be so, then to the precise extent to which a man is alive to, and justly appreciates the consequences of his actions, he should invariably choose the greater good or lesser evil; which accordingly we find to be the case around us.

As the value of this principle rests upon the inseparability of any act from its consequences (which is now an acknowledged scientific fact as regards all events whatever), it follows that the indispensable condition of universality of application is perfectly fulfilled. The other condition necessary to its complete efficiency—knowledge, and sagacity in

the apprehension of consequences—experience unfortunately proves to be too often unfulfilled; were it otherwise we should not have to search for a rule of conduct. But the fact that men with knowledge and sagacity most seldom err, while those without such qualities constantly do so, is a strong argument for the validity of my principle; while the rapid and wide extension of knowledge, and the daily-increasing appreciation of it, afford solid ground for hope that it will eventually be universally recognised. That the necessary consequences of every act are morally or indirectly appropriate, requires to be known and thoroughly understood; indeed, in comparison with the due apprehension of this fact all other knowledge is futile and worthless.

For the whole of his conduct man thus is evidently not responsible to any authority, but strictly amenable to physical consequences; and the degree of his comprehension of them is the measure of his obligation. Responsibility is a phrase scarcely appropriate in such a connection, although sufficiently intelligible. Responsibility then, or amenability to natural consequences, is co-extensive with the power of action, and ignorance of them does not exempt from infallible retribution. Obligation is measurable by the extent of apprehension of those consequences; and social penalties partially remedy ignorance of them by adding more perceptible unmistakable penalties to those natural ones which are generally overlooked. With society, ignorance of social penalties is seldom, though too often, admitted as a ground of exemption; but with inexorable nature ignorance is never admitted as an excuse. Society, however, thus indirectly remedies ignorance of *natural* consequences, by teaching offenders the knowledge of them, which they evidently want. Man is exactly recompensed by natural consequences, for observing or violating the laws which experience dictates as necessary to preserve his life, health, and general well-being; and liable to social consequences for observing or violating those prescribed by the society in which he lives. This social responsibility is only rendered necessary by the deficiency of his comprehension of physical consequences, by his general ignorance of natural effects; and thus partially makes up the difference between his obligation and his responsibility. In nature he is irresistibly impelled to maintain his existence and health if possible; he is provided more or less adequately with means; and he is with perfect measure rewarded for wise attention, or punished for disregard, to

natural laws by the natural consequences of his acts, and *by them alone*. There is no fact better established than that attention to, or neglect of, diet, temperance, or hygiene, is followed by peculiarly appropriate consequences; as also that in cases of constitutional defect, where wise conduct is unavailing to secure the usual reward, so many are traceable to the ignorance or carelessness of ancestors, as to justify the conclusion that the principle holds good with the race when it seems to fail with the individual; and though on any principle of merit and demerit this could not be excused or justified by any expedient, there is really nothing whatever which detracts from the perfection of the course of nature. Where the error has been carried to an extreme, death ensues, sometimes without the extension of the evil to posterity. When it is possible that in posterity the ill effects might be counteracted by greater knowledge, the opportunity is afforded; but when persistently neglected, injury to the race is prevented by the extinction more or less rapid of the family, which should form a salutary warning to other individuals of the race. And such examples would always produce their visible good results were such effects readily traceable to their causes. But that they are not is the most powerful stimulus to their study; and when physiology is properly and generally understood, a key will be held, fitted to the solution and remedy of most of such difficulties. But this want of knowledge is also in fulfilment of another law as vast and significant as any, and of immense importance in every science. Without the urgent want there could be no vigorous action. There is no motion, physical or moral, but under the necessitation of the aggregate of its antecedents; and from man's most stringent needs always arise his most effective energies. The more a spring is bent the stronger is its rebound. The politico-economical law of demand and supply pervades all sciences, and forms only one of the innumerable bonds which knit them together into one harmonious whole.

I have dwelt upon hereditary evil for an illustration, as being one of the most complex but pregnant problems of all, and therefore the better test of a principle; and I only wish that I had time to do it justice. Viewed socially, the same apparently anomalous facts furnish society with a reason, which it could not otherwise learn, for discouraging in individuals, acts which would ultimately tend to injure the race.

But simpler instances are far more obvious and common. For the same principle extends as far as the meaning of the word moral—to all man's manners, customs, and acts. Fire is destructive of his bodily tissues. The first experiment convinces him of it, and if he be wise he will not even try a second. If he fight with his neighbours, he is hurt; and suffers, though he conquer. Peace therefore is moral, and war is immoral; but as man, when ignorant, acts from impulse and habit and not from principle, war is still only too frequent. If he break the laws of his nation, society avenges itself upon him for the offence; but I wish to draw a distinction here between the offence against society—which it seems to me consists in the breach of its laws—and the offence against the natural rights of any individual, both being included in the same act. It strikes me that man's responsibility, or certain amenability, to natural consequences, should be distinguished from his responsibility or liability to social consequences, though the act be one and the same. The natural consequences of any act are in themselves amply retributive, which in many cases is not recognised; the fact being lost sight of behind the more plainly perceptible penalties inflicted by society for the infringement of its laws alone. Take the case of a liar. Society punishes merely false oaths, which impair its judicial administration. The general contempt, avoidance, and other detrimental results of having the reputation of a liar, are *natural*, not *social* consequences; for they spring from the spontaneous, self-defensive action of individuals, not from the organised action of the social body. But natural evil consequences are inevitable for the slightest infraction of truth, and are eventually far more severe, indeed all the greater in proportion to its apparent success; to the extent to which the lie is believed. For when a man utters a falsehood, and is thus led to regard it as advantageous to him, he doubly misrepresents and inverts facts to himself, and acquires a fatal misconception as to the relative value of truth and falsehood; his judgment becomes distorted; every repetition of the offence against himself and nature increases the perversion of facts; he soon loses all power of representing things correctly to himself, or of judging accurately of the probable effects of his words or acts; unless extraordinary circumstances forcibly impress upon him the true cause of his insidious error, his mental degeneration becomes complete; and whatever may have been his original intellectual capacity, he is nearly sure to

become inextricably lost in a maze of difficulty and ruin. But in any case the mental deterioration forms the severest retribution, and none the less, but rather the more so, that it is so insensible. Nothing is more ordinary than for persons of even superior abilities, if they once engage in a course of falsehood and deception, entirely as it were to lose their head, and to commit themselves at last in a manner absolutely childish and unworthy of their natural capacity, and utterly inexplicable in any other manner with which I am acquainted. If I name as an instance, Dixon, of the Oriental Bank, the example may have more force than my argument. That Dixon acquired his position in that institution is proof that he at first earned and deserved confidence; and his capacity for judging wisely and rightly must have been vastly superior at the beginning, than at the end of his career, when he not only was guilty of the most puerile and profitless duplicity, but appeared also altogether incapable of perceiving either his dishonesty or his folly. But even when falsehoods are told with what are deemed the best intentions, it is almost always perceptibly the case that beside the unconscious but inevitable mental injury, the purposed object also is defeated, and it becomes apparent after all that truth would have answered best. And it is clear that even cleverness and sagacity cannot avail to enable a man to discern when a lie would be advantageous to him; for he views things from a deceptive stand-point, and it would be wonderful indeed if even the severest logic were to deduce from erroneous premisses anything but false conclusions.

We can all bear witness to the appropriate ways in which various vices *produce* their own proper and significant penalties. Intemperance, debauchery, lying, idleness, dishonesty, selfishness, ignorance, all not only meet with, but clearly *cause* more exactly appropriate punishments than any with which society visits those offences of which it takes cognizance. I think that the fact that such habits are indirectly though surely recompensed by their own necessary consequences, constitutes them moral offences, and that it is only when they are publicly injurious to others, that they become offences against, and are punishable by society. But whether such bad habits culminate or not in open social offences, they infallibly bring their own natural retribution of physical and mental deterioration; and the ever-increasing but unfelt difficulty of recovering from or staying that deterioration, is its most dangerous and fatal feature. The degrading results

of confirmed drunkenness or gambling need only to be mentioned. How frequently do we see degraded ruffians, who for years have never felt a higher sentiment than brutal selfishness, at last committing openly, even such acts as murder, although directly contrary to their false views of that self-interest which is their professed rule of conduct. And when it then becomes the interest and therefore the duty of society to remove or destroy a criminal, it must also be the criminal's best interest to be so disposed of. His degeneration, though unconscious, accelerates so rapidly and becomes so irremediable, that every step only plunges him deeper and deeper into vice and into misery.

How delightful to remember that equally appropriate rewards are the inevitable results of temperance, probity, industry, benevolence, and knowledge! How true it is that honesty is the best policy, and that virtue is really its own reward! How true it is that these rewards are strictly though indirectly physical, arising from reflex social action, and are therefore called moral!

Some persons profess to be shocked at the idea of recommending men to be honest or moral from motives of policy; of making virtue a question of mere self-interest. I should not demur to this high-flown æsthetic sentiment being adopted as a rule of conduct by those who recognise its force, provided it were found effective. But notoriously, it is not only inoperative upon, but beyond the conception of all but a very few; indeed those who uphold it are not always as observant of it as their professedly selfish neighbours. But what we want is, a principle of universal application; one which has, if possible, more weight with those of evil tendencies and habits than with those of good. Any other is absolutely worthless; for it is the immoral, and not the moral, who require a motive, and an incentive to alter their conduct. I am convinced, however, that it is only in speculative argument that the idea is entertained at all; that it never affected the conduct of anyone when more powerful reasons did not support it,—sufficient to outweigh entirely all temptation to the contrary;—but men like to hug themselves upon the *nobleness*, rather than the truth of the motives they can find for their own actions, and to assume a virtue though they have it not.

It may be said that it is not proved that fully adequate rewards and punishments are natural inevitable consequences of all human acts. Granted; it is not proved.

Neither is it proved that the action of gravity is universal. Still the practical universality of the force of gravity is so certain as to be accepted as a safe assumption ; nay, a valid principle ; and a historical comparison of the two cases will show no material difference in the probable reliability in each. The validity of the principle that every event is the necessary result of its antecedents, physical and moral, and must also cause as necessarily its consequences (which must also be its appropriate moral consequences), is substantially enunciated in such notorious maxims as "Everything must have a cause ;" "Honesty is the best policy," &c. This principle is the basis of all experience and knowledge, and its truth is proved by their mere existence. Curiously enough, it is only beginning to be appreciated, Mr. Buckle being, I think, its first consistent expounder. It was practically admitted in conduct (the only true test of opinion) long before it was distinctly affirmed, but it has always been theoretically contested on the ground of apparent exceptions. But gravity was known as a principle long before Newton showed that it was apparently of universal application. The supposed exceptions exhibited in the perturbations of the planets were subsequently recognised, but did not make wise men despair of the principle. They had confidence in it, and worked it out, until they demonstrated that the apparent exceptions were really exemplifications and proofs of the immutable law.

I will now attempt to view historically the origin and progress of both the genuine and the fictitious ideas of moral responsibility and obligation.

In a primitive state of existence, man's wants are so few that it is generally long before he arrives at the conception of the exclusive right to property. But it naturally arises when what he acquires costs him labour, and as he becomes civilised, and his wants and possessions increase, so does the notion of the right to property acquire strength with exercise.* But it is long before he learns to add to it what it

* Since writing the text I have been fortunate enough to meet with strong corroboration of my theory, in a work by an author classed by Buckle, as, "by far the ablest traveller who has published observations on European Society." *Hist. of Civil.* vol. i. p. 239. "In this nation of small proprietors the sense of honour is more developed, and more generally diffused, than in the countries feudally constituted. Loss of honour has been from the earliest times, a specific effective punishment in the criminal law of Norway, standing next in degree to loss of life. The possession of

evidently had not at first; the idea of demerit in anyone who deprives him of what he claims, who infringes on his right to the proceeds of his labour. As this idea is unknown among savages and young children, or any but an organised society, and commences about the period when society first becomes established by mutual agreement upon rules of association, or at the age of comprehension of the advantages of co-operation and reciprocal security, it seems probable at least, that these two circumstances have some causal connection. The ideas of merit and demerit appear to me to have arisen from the reciprocal demand for and supply of sympathy and support by social allies, to resist aggression and co-operate in labour; superadded to the simple sympathy and antipathy of an earlier development, and exaggerated by the unfortunate predominance of feeling over reason. There is no antipathy in the feeling with which an animal is pursued for the purposes of food; but it is strong in the chase of dangerous beasts of prey, and is proportioned to their power to harm. Still this is but antipathy, and there is nothing more in the wars of savages and the squabbles of young children, who cannot be said to have attained to a social condition. Even civilised people who readily recognise and deprecate breaches of moral right, *inter se*, exterminate savages and appropriate their possessions, without considering the principle infringed, or feeling more than simple antipathy at most. They *first attribute blame* to such savages, for *conscious breaches of their moral code*, as they do to children when they likewise become familiarized with, and appear to comprehend their conventional notions of social rights and duties. On the other hand, praise is awarded by them for the readiness with which some children and savages comprehend and conform to such notions of moral right and mutual service, and thence also the corresponding idea of moral responsibility and obligation.

But it is after men have begun to experience the security and the power afforded by occasional and prolonged reciprocal assistance and co-operation in labour and defence; and when they begin to agree upon rules and conditions upon

“property naturally diffuses through all classes the self-respect, regard for character and public opinion, circumspection of conduct, and consideration for others, which flow from or are connected with the possession of property, and render these influential on the morals, manners, and mode of thinking of the whole body of the people.” S. Laing’s “Residence in Norway, 1834-6.” Part I., p. 152. Traveller’s Library, Longmans, 1851.

which such benefits shall be mutually given and received ; that their sympathy and antipathy extend beyond themselves and those things in which the investment of their own labour has created a personal interest ; and they come to regard aggression or depredation committed against their social body, or against any individual, or right, or law, or custom of it, as an indirect or moral injury to themselves. An individual, in calling upon his neighbours to resist or prevent an aggression upon himself or any of them, from within or from without their social body, naturally represents the offender as a proper object of antipathy and hate, and claims protection and united action against him, from their sympathy and sense of mutual interest.

Here then, I believe, was the origin of the idea of *indirect*, or *moral obligation* ; and the first germ in connection with it of that sentiment which subsequently developed into the system of praise and blame, merit and demerit, which I propose to trace a little further. The idea of *moral responsibility*, I think, belongs to, and must have originated in, a different and ruder form of civil society—that of the paternal government, chieftainship, or monarchy ; which is the development of the principle of authority, and perfectly adapted to the government of children. The mutual dependence and reliance generated by the operation of the democratic principle, experience teaches us are far more appropriate and favourable to the equal conditions, the capacities, the activity, and the prosperity of adults, national as well as individual.

That this view is correct—that the notion of merit and demerit, desert for praise and blame—is compounded of, first, the feeling of the right to property, acquired from the consciousness of having expended labour for it ; secondly, the sense of mutual advantage and reciprocal dependence, ensuing from combination, first casual and temporary, afterwards permanent, and resulting at last in social security and collective power ; thirdly the sympathy and antipathy which, by the force of habit, men readily learn to transfer beyond the immediate to the most indirect perceptible causes of pleasure and pain ; and lastly, the gradual exaltation of the whole into a transcendental region of sentiment in proportion to the development of what is called the æsthetic faculty. This account of the concrete idea is strikingly corroborated by the fact that in the history of the world, the development of the moral sentiment originated almost

entirely among democracies or republics, where the sense of mutual dependence, confidence, and security, was the leading principle of action and thought; and was far more slowly and imperfectly introduced into despotic monarchies, where that of dependence upon authority took its place. The moral effect of social co-operative unity was strikingly exemplified in the republics of Greece and Rome, where it may be said to have attained a morbid growth; for so intensified by the æsthetic element was their moral sentiment of patriotism and individual virtue, that in deference to it they not only freely sacrificed their private interests and their lives, but they frequently, on principle, involved their own adored countries, as well as those of their adversaries, in the miseries of war and devastation. Contrast with their conduct the debased condition of the eastern monarchies, where, though civilization had an earlier beginning, the moral development, not only then but almost ever since, has notoriously exhibited altogether inferior results.

I have characterised the exalted and generally admired patriotic sentiment of the Greeks and Romans as morbid, because the evil results proved it to be, in such an extreme, pernicious; though doubtless it was necessary as a link in the chain of events, and for the enlightenment of the human mind to the advantages of mutual confidence and combination. Of the two, the Roman sentiment was the most practical and least æsthetic; and the stern vigour of their morality, of which Regulus afforded a significant example, had throughout Europe a powerful effect, which long outlived their political fabric. To its enervation, first by the influence of the more æsthetic Greek development, and to its subsequent rapid degeneration under the principle of authority which supervened with the emperors, do I attribute its complete suppression, until the revival of trade and commerce, and the consequent reappearance of the republican spirit after the long night of the dark ages. For nearly a thousand years did that enthusiasm, which lost its direction and object on the severance of the old republican bonds of mutual interest and united power, unfortunately find nothing with which to ally itself, but the religious sentiment; and thus formed with it the most appalling scourge with which human nature has ever been afflicted—fanaticism. Engrossed exclusively by imaginary visions of supernatural duties, and therefore bereft of data by which to check and regulate their exaggerated exaltation, all scientific

knowledge and habits having entirely disappeared before pious asceticism and intolerance, men seem to have found the chief vent for their sympathies and antipathies in injuring and torturing not only others but themselves. In the previous democratic period, when dialectics and culture rapidly developed the minds of men, they not only acquired an enthusiastic activity, but first learned to subordinate their own interest and happiness to those of others. Still this development was morbid and exaggerated; for the general interest of the human race is as much injured by a narrow, greedy patriotism, which seeks its own aggrandizement at the expense of other nations, as the real interest of the individual is damaged by the notion that it can be really served by depredations upon others. But the subsequent age of religious frenzy was infinitely worse. Men were wholly possessed by an insane superstition, in which they preserved no features of their former progress but that energy and self-subordination which then misdirected them into the wildest excesses; and there appear to have been few of any intellectual activity, whose pious rage could be satisfied with less than either enduring the pangs of martyrdom themselves, or of inflicting them on others, for the glory of God. At last, fortunately, the paroxysm spent itself. Population had gradually multiplied so much that in many places men were driven by their increasing wants to agriculture and to trade. These necessarily restored the sense of mutual dependence, confidence, and reliance. The republican spirit revived. The Reformation then for ever burst the bonds of authority, to which the human mind can never again be submitted; for the invention of printing has secured the permanent advance and wider dissemination of knowledge for the future. The sympathies and antipathies of men are now being gradually brought under the government of reason, after the chastening of a salutary though dreadful experience; while the superiority of the ratio of the increase of population, to that of the means of subsistence, secures the maintenance of an abundant and sustained energy. We have, at last, arrived at an age of unfettered criticism; at a day of judgment. But fearful evidence of the severity of the ordeal through which the human intellect has passed is still everywhere perceptible, and it still exhibits symptoms of the panic by which it was lately transported. The fancied belief in a *super-natural in nature*,—in a transcendental moral faculty, in a theory of more than moral

duty,—and above all, in a hypothetical future ; still too much distracts the attention of men from their present practical physical requirements, leads them to depreciate and neglect their advantages ; and opposes, though with daily decreasing power, the irresistible progress of that scientific knowledge, in which alone the prosperity, happiness, and true virtue of the human race, are to be sought and found.

But throughout this hasty sketch of the genesis of the idea of moral responsibility and obligation, there is nothing to indicate the existence, or to demand the importation of any more mysterious principle than physical advantage and conventional convenience ; the cause and explanation of current theories being, that in the matured social system, the causes of mental phenomena are much more complex, indirect, and therefore obscure ; and at the same time the inchoate sentiment becomes more refined and defined, than in a very primitive condition of society. This seems to have led men insensibly to regard all indirect consequences of an act, as if inhering in the act itself ; and it is called moral or immoral, when its *general tendency* only can be discerned as it were by habit ; its physical consequences becoming too complicated and numerous to be easily traced. A moral man is of course one who customarily does moral acts, or such as are calculated to produce generally good effects ; an immoral man is one who habitually commits acts of an evil tendency, according to the moral standard of the society in which each lives. It is corroborative of this view, that morality is as variable as the conditions of climate and of civilisation. Hospitality is incomplete in Lapland and elsewhere, without the concession of conjugal privileges in favour of a guest. In Ladak, &c., it is moral for a woman to have several brothers for her husbands in one house ; and in Fiji and Melanesia, it is a moral duty to bury parents alive. All these customs are practised under a moral obligation. Among our own ancestors within three centuries, it was meritorious to burn one's neighbour alive if of a different religious opinion. A pious bishop thanked God that he had been enabled to burn alive after torturing seven hundred in a single year, and he died in the odour of sanctity. None of us, probably, would envy him his state of mind ; still it must not be overlooked that that would be one of virtuous self-complacency, and the reverse of that of any man who should do so in our times. When *his* piety was most fervent, his acts were what *we* deem most

atrocious. But as beyond dispute he acted conscientiously, we cannot blame him; his knowledge being the measure of his obligation. And his case is only one among thousands. Calvin in the same manner, in a religious paroxysm, burnt Servetus alive on a fire of green faggots, and was thus most criminal when most pious. But the only difference between them and us is, that we have acquired more knowledge of physical science, and consequently of the nature and social relations of man; while their rule of conduct was simply their religious duty, as deduced from the Bible. If it be said that they mis-interpreted it, that is only one proof among thousands, that interpretations of any such standard are and must be as various as men; and a demonstration of the inefficacy of any mysterious and therefore supposititious principle.

Altogether it seems clear that such notions as desert for praise and blame, and merit and demerit, are the results of the force of imagination and idealistic habits, upon a groundwork of ancient conventional customs; and that they are purely arbitrary and factitious. For all proves that standards of morality vary with degrees of latitude and the lapse of time; and that he who conforms to, or violates, or endeavours to improve the local current standard, whatever it may be, must as necessarily experience the exactly proportioned and appropriate consequences, as the planets must fulfil their cycles in accordance with the law of gravity.

I have now endeavoured to establish consistent and practical moral principles upon patent facts, and the invariable relation between causes and effects which it is impossible to infringe, instead of upon a mysterious fiction, which is directly violated daily by whosoever lists; to prove that it is only a superficial and erroneous observation which leads to the supposition of any injustice in the mundane distribution of pains and pleasures;—a fundamental error, which, while it forms the motive for imagining endless methods of compensation, can never explain or remove, or more than evade the anomaly, that the injustice so assumed must be the deliberate act of the Deity; and I trust that I have succeeded in showing that we are justified in attributing absolute infallibility to the rule that every effect of every cause must be the most perfectly appropriate, morally as well as physically; and also that careful examination will transform even apparently vitiating exceptions into irrefragable proofs of its validity.

I have contended that one condition only is still wanting to man, to enable him to perfect his morality; and that is, full knowledge of the natural consequences and of the causes of his acts. I have pointed out also that his morality is always proportioned to such knowledge. The obvious lesson, therefore, which I deduce from the whole is that, to extend and disseminate knowledge (and most of all among the ignorant and vicious) as widely and completely as lies in our utmost means and power, is not only our best policy and highest virtue, but our most sacred and imperative duty.

These principles may be formulated thus:—

1st.—That every event, physical or moral, is the necessary result of its antecedents.*

2nd.—That moral power is simply indirect physical force.

3rd.—That the highest interest of the individual and that of society, cannot really conflict, but are absolutely identical in every instance.

4th.—That man's knowledge is the measure of his obligation to virtue, and of his prospect of reward; while his responsibility or certain amenability to the necessary and appropriate consequences of his acts, is coextensive with his power of action; and

5th.—That virtue is therefore really its own sole and ample reward.

* Hobbes has I think conclusively shown that *any sufficient cause, must be also a necessary cause.* "I hold that to be a *sufficient cause*, to which "nothing is wanting that is needful to the producing of the *effect*. The "same is also a *necessary cause*. For if it be possible that a *sufficient cause* "shall not bring forth the *effect*, then there wanteth somewhat which was "needful to the producing of it, and so the *cause* was not *sufficient*; but if "it be impossible that a *sufficient cause* should not produce the *effect*, then "is a *sufficient cause* a *necessary cause*, for that is said to produce an effect "necessarily that cannot but produce it. Hence it is manifest, that what- "soever is produced, is produced *necessarily*; for whatsoever is produced "hath had a sufficient cause to produce it, or else it had not been; and "therefore also *voluntary actions* are necessitated.

"Lastly, that ordinary *definition* of a *free agent*, namely, *that a free agent is that, which, when all things are present which are needful to produce the effect, can nevertheless not produce it*, implies a contradiction, and is "nonsense; being as much as to say, the cause may be *sufficient*, that "is to say, *necessary*, and yet the *effect* shall not follow." Hobbes's Works, vol. iv., pp. 274, 275. I cannot but consider that the succinct wisdom of these weighty words is unsurpassed, and their scope must be startling to whoever will ponder them as they deserve.